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Citation

Engell, James R. 1995. A Yet Deeper Well: 'Kubla Khan,' Wookey Hole, Cain. The Wordsworth Circle 26, no. 1: 3.

Published Version

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A Yet Deeper Well: "Kubla Khan," Wookey Hole, Cain

James Engell

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

While much commentary on the sacred river Alph and its origin emphasizes the sexual, creative force of the fountain in propelling itself from inside the earth, a few critics have also linked those lines with the Cheddar Caves, Wookey Hole, and the River Axe. In 1939, as a supplement to Lowes's Road to Xanadu, Wylie Sypher presented detailed arguments concerning the geography of Somerset, including the caves at Wookey Hole, and the landscape of "Kubla Khan" ("Coleridge's Somerset: A Byway to Xanadu," PQ 18:4 (October 1939): 353-66, esp. 354-62). Recent glosses on individual lines or images in the poem continue to enrich its texture (for example, Jack Stillinger's

explication in JEGP of the line, "I would build that dome in air"). This brief essay adds more layering to Coleridge's images of "huge fragments," "chaffy grain," "dancing rocks," and "caverns measureless to man."

Current visitors to Wookey Hole, a short distance west of Wells, find nine underground chambers in the network of caverns. The first three were open in Coleridge's time, numbers four through six are constantly filled with water, and seven through nine have become accessible only by recent tunneling work. The third chamber of Wookey Hole is dome shaped, a circular cavern. When the river floods, as it has three times in the twentieth century and countless times before that, this huge chamber fills with water at a startling speed--twenty minutes during the last flood in 1968--and the gushing waters, under tremendous force and pressure, carry sizable fragments of rock that swirl about inside the chamber. The shape and large size of this domed chamber appear to have been determined by the cutting action of repeated floods and by the "dancing rocks" that whirl around and scrape its walls until they are forced to the surface with the flood water.

As a method of tracing the nearby underground streams that join to form the River Axe, one of the present exhibitions at Wookey Hole, "Tracing the Underground Streams," describes this ancient method of tracking the elusive waters, used before dye marking: "Centuries ago, farmers threshing corn sometimes dumped the waste chaff into swallets [swallet holes, natural drains in the fields]. Some of it was washed right through the underground waterways. Countrymen in the Mendips and Cotswolds remember old tales of chaff from a swallet appearing in the springwater" (emphasis in the exhibition text). So, "huge fragments," "dancing rocks" and "chaffy grain" actually were forced up together with the rapid, bursting waters of the River Axe at Wookey Hole.

The underground river there is, in a real sense, still "measureless to man." Its bottom has never been located or plumbed. In fact, the current European cave diving record was established in 1985 at Wookey Hole when a diver, reaching two hundred fifty

feet and still descending through a passage about eighteen inches in diameter filled with frigid, down-flowing water, was forced to return to the subterranean surface of the river. In addition, explorers of the underground streams in the area have often proceeded more than a mile laterally underground before natural barriers have stopped them--but not the stream.

When, in a later note, Coleridge rather breezily calls the poem "a psychological curiosity," a deeply personal element from his early life may be part of the poem's pentimento. The "sunny spots" have been identified by John Beer and Michael Grevis as related to Cain and the eighteenth-century understanding of daemonic cults associated with him and his followers (Beer, "The Languages of Kubla Khan," in Coleridge's Imagination, ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn, Nicholas Roe; Grevis, "Notes on the Place of Composition of 'Kubla Khan' by S.T. Coleridge" in Charles Lamb Bulletin (January 1991): 12-19). This observation takes on a good deal of added weight if we consider the psychological interpretation of Coleridge's life and work presented by Stephen Weissman in His Brother's Keeper (pp. 107-118; also James Engell, Coleridge: The Early Family Letters, pp. 1-2, 5-13), and the profound importance of Coleridge's personal relationship with his brother Frank, whom he tried to stab when they were young boys, quarreling. It was probably only a few weeks after composing "Kubla Khan" that Coleridge discussed with Wordsworth a projected joint work, The Wanderings of Cain. And it was near that time that Coleridge wrote to Tom Poole the autobiographical letters relating the childhood traumas that involved his brother Frank.

From Wookey Hole the River Axe flows somewhat more than twice five miles, "Meandering with a mazy motion / Through wood and dale" down to the Severn Sea, a venerable name once commonly used for the Bristol Channel.

Note: I wish to thank Dr. Anthony Dangerfield for help in finding references to earlier Coleridgean work on Wookey Hole, and to my son Alec, who insisted in the summer of

1994, prior to the biannual Coleridge Conference, that he and his father visit those caverns.